

Publieke steun voor de Europese Unie : Analyse van de publieke opinie in 12 lidstaten, 1952-1998

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Summary

Public support for the European Union

An analysis of public opinion in 12 member states, 1952-1998.

Following the signing of the Treaty of Maastricht, the European Union (EU) went through a political crisis. The referenda necessary to ratify the Treaty failed to produce the desired clear mandates for further integration. The “*nej*” in the Danish referendum (1992) on the EU-treaty caused a shock-wave throughout the Union. Although it was not the first occasion on which politicians were confronted with public opposition towards their plans, this time a crisis of political legitimacy lurked. It was not until the second successful Danish referendum (1993) that the crisis passed. This shows that public support for European integration must not be taken for granted or ignored. Against this background, the author studied both changes in public support for the EU *within* member states (*changes*) and changes in the differences in support for the EU *between* member states (*shifts*) in the period between 1952 and 1998.

Chapter 1 contains the research goal and the research questions. The goal is to gain a better understanding of the causes of changes within, and shifts of public support for the EU at the level of member states. For this purpose, the author chooses a longitudinal and cross-national research design. To gain a better understanding, the author also decided not to confine his analyses to the level of member states (macro), but also to pay attention to changes and differences at the individual (micro) and meso-level (groups, cohorts, generations) of aggregation. The six central research questions that guided the research are:

1. What is the level of public support for the EU within the member states?
2. How great are the differences in the level of public support for the EU between the member states?
3. Is the level of public support for the EU within the member states subject to change? (*changes*)
4. Are the differences in the level of public support for the EU between member states subject to change? (*shifts*)
5. What factors explain the formation of attitudes (support) towards the EU at the individual level?
6. What factors explain the level of support at the national (member state) level?

In the second chapter a description is given of the post-war (WOII) history of the EU. The

forming of the EU is part of a much broader process of increasing Western European cooperation after the Second World War. The increasing cooperation was the inevitable outcome of the rising tensions between the two world-superpowers, the United States of America (USA) and the Soviet-Union (SU), still remaining in Europe, which culminated in the Cold War. Within the scope of this war, the Americans demanded closer cooperation of the European states within their hemisphere (Western Europe). Serving their own interests, the various Western European countries comply with the American demand in exchange for economic and military aid and permanent participation of American troops in the defence of Western Europe. The first steps towards Western European cooperation were eventually taken within the framework of the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (today the OECD), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the Council of Europe in 1948-9. The first shoot on the EU-tree appeared in 1952 when the initial six member states (France, West Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries) joined forces within the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). The establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Community for Atomic Energy (Euratom) in 1957 are the next two branches. This form of cooperation within the European Community(ies) (EC) is characterised by: a supranational regime, a French-German Axis (excluding the United Kingdom) and acquiescence of the USA. During the recent decades, the scope of the EC has been extended to more policy fields, and the power and influence of its authorities in these fields have increased gradually. In 1993 the EC became part of an even broader framework: the EU. The new member states that acceded were: Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom in 1973; Greece in 1986; Portugal and Spain in 1986; and, Austria, Finland and Sweden in 1995. The discussion of EU-history in Chapter 2 ends with the observation that the creation and development of the EC/EU during the first decades have hardly been something on which the mass public had any (direct) influence. Through the introduction of national referenda on EU-matters in the 1970s (and onwards) and direct elections towards the European Parliament since 1979 the situation has improved to some extent, but the actual influence of the public on EU-matters is still very limited.

In Chapter 3, the question is posed as to whether the EU is a proper political system and whether the EU needs *public* political support to function and be sustained. This question is answered on the basis of Easton's (political) systems-theory. From this theory, it is inferred that proper political systems are authoritative and decisive. Whether international political organisations are political systems is primarily dependent on whether an organisation is supranational and has the power to induce the member states to accept its decisions as binding. On the basis of the supranational regime underlying the EU, it is concluded that the EU is at least to some extent a political system.

The second part of the question is whether the EU needs *public* political support to function and be sustained. The answer to this question depends on the answer to the question whether an international organisation can take measures which the citizens of the member states must accept as directly applicable. If that is the case, one can argue on the basis of Easton's theory that some measure of public political support is necessary. The EU can make and take directly applicable decisions and therefore it is concluded that, in principle, the EU needs some form of public political support. The EU relies daily on its member states for the implementation of its policies, the enforcement of its rules, the collection of its financial means and its jurisdiction. This reliance entails that in many instances the EU can rely on the public support for the national political systems and therefore the need for self-sustaining support may be less important.

At the end of the chapter support for the EU is defined as an individual attitude or behaviour by which a person expresses his positive or negative orientation towards the EU or a specific aspect of the EU.

Chapters 4 and 5 offer a first encounter with the data used and the answers to the first four research questions. For the analyses the author has relied on survey data from a-select samples of national populations in twelve member states (excluding Austria, Finland and Sweden). The German data are limited to West Germany and the data from the United Kingdom do not contain the (sometimes) available data from Northern Ireland. The author has used some 50 different surveys from the period between 1952 and 1998. In Chapter 4, the concept of *support for the EU* (at the individual level) is operationalized in three indicators; and the concept of *public support* (at the level of nations) is operationalized as the percentage positive support minus the percentage negative support within a country. In Chapter 5, the available national time series on public support for the EU are discussed. For some countries, these time series go back to the 1950s, but for the smaller member states that acceded to the EU the series only go back to the year prior to/of their entrance. In total, the available database contains more than 500,000 respondents.

The answers to the first four research questions can be found in the conclusions of Chapters 4 and 5. The first conclusion is that the measurement of the level of public support for the EU within a member state is extremely dependent on the indicator used. It is impossible to say, therefore, what exact the level of public support is in a single country. Nevertheless, there are no signs whatsoever that there is a pervasive majority opposition towards the EU in any of the twelve member states, although at some points in time critics outweigh the supporters in Denmark and Great Britain. Comparing national scores based on the same indicator striking differences are found in support for the EU between member states, as well as major changes within and shifts between member states.

To explain the changes and shifts at the national level, as well as the formation of individual attitudes towards the EU, two theories are used in this research: Ingleharts Silent Revolution-theory and Zallers Receive-Accept-and-Sample-model (RAS-model). In Chapters 6 and 7 both theories are discussed and hypotheses are formulated. In Chapters 8 and 9, the hypotheses are tested empirically.

Ingleharts Silent Revolution-theory and its central concepts - postmaterialism and cognitive mobilisation - are put on trial at three levels of aggregation. The idea is that both postmaterialism and cognitive mobilisation (level of political skills) positively contribute to the individual feelings of support for the EU at the individual level, and to the level of public support at the national level. Furthermore it is expected that among the members of each new generation in the member states the percentage of postmaterialists and the level of political skills rises systematically. Therefore, it is also hypothesised that there are systematic inter-generational differences in support for the EU. The results of the empirical tests are poor. Postmaterialism proves to be unrelated to attitudes towards the EU, whereas the concept of cognitive mobilisation makes sense only at the individual level. The idea that there are systematic and pervasive intergenerational differences in all member states is also not borne out by the data. The conclusion reached in Chapter 8 is that Inglehart's theory and concepts are of almost no use in explaining attitudes towards EU, and changes and shifts within and between member states.

Zaller's RAS-model leads to much better results. Based on the idea that people "hold" almost no political attitudes, Zaller argues that people form political attitudes temporarily on the basis of a sample from the information they receive either directly or indirectly from the mass media. In principle, citizens will accept all political information - this is an essential difference with other fields of interest - from the media without any filtering, unless the information they receive contains references to one's central political predispositions. It is contended that in virtually no individual case, the attitude towards the EU is a central political predisposition, but rather party-preference. From the assumptions underlying the RAS-model, it is hypothesised that the level of public support for the EC will reflect the balance between arguments in favour and against in the elite discourse on the EU-issue within a member state. The elite discourse is after all the main (only) source of information on an issue for the mass media. The elite consists of persons professionally occupied with the EU-issue, such as politicians, scientists, journalists and lobbyists.

Furthermore, if the EU-issue is subject of a struggle between different political parties, then one would expect public opinion to split along party lines. Supporters of party A will filter the arguments originating from other parties (B,C,D, ...) on the basis of their party-preference (negative selection). As a result of this process, the arguments that voters accept as valid - and that will be stored in their heads for the formation of future attitudes - become more or less

unconsciously and automatically biased towards the point of view of their favourite party. This means that when party-supporters need to form attitudes towards a political issue, it is very likely that their attitude reflects the position of their party on this issue. It is also assumed that the stronger a voter identifies with a certain party, the stronger the functioning of this mechanism will be.

All the hypotheses deduced from Zaller's RAS-model withstand the empirical tests. The empirical results do not rule out two simple and attractive alternative explanations. The first alternative is that voters base their party preferences on the basis of an evaluation of issue positions of different parties; the second is that parties try to reflect the attitudes of their followers in an attempt to hold their share of votes. The alternatives are rejected on the basis of the abundant knowledge available on the national character of European(!) elections and the few, but very strong indications from panel research that EU-citizens have formed stable EU-attitudes to a very limited extent. Zaller's model is the only model that, in the author's view, is compatible with these insights and therefore the author rejects the two alternative explanations. This means that public opinion reflects the balance of arguments pro and con within the mass media and that parties serve (through negative selection) as a kind of prompter for their voters.

In the final chapter, the main conclusions from the different chapters are repeated and an outline for further research is drawn. To gain a further understanding of public opinion formation, attention must be focused on panel research in combination with content analyses of mass media in both member and non-member states. The fact that public opinion is so much dependent on the opinion of the political elites makes it essential that more investigation is conducted into the causes of elite opinion formation.